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## ... For Open Debate

By Morton H. Halperin

WASHINGTON — A policy debate on Capitol Hill often turns into a struggle for the dominant cliché — for the slogan that captures attention as the pithiest way of describing what is at stake and what should be done. So it is that when the House of Representatives this week debates a bill to end covert support for military operations in Nicaragua, opponents of the measure will be arguing for "symmetry." Their proposal will be that the United States should continue to provide aid for those seeking to overthrow the Government of Nicaragua as long as that Government is providing support for the guerrillas in El Salvador. "Symmetry" does have a plausible ring to it. This makes it all the more important to understand why it is a dangerous and inappropriate guide to United States policy in Central America.

The cliché response to "symmetry" is that "two wrongs do not make a right." The longer answer is embodied in a bill co-sponsored by two middle-of-the-road Democratic Congressmen, Clement J. Zablocki of Wisconsin and Edward P. Boland of Massachusetts. It is a careful proposal based on the principle that the United States should obey the law and honor our treaty obligations.

Evidence from Central America makes it clear that the executive branch's "policy" is to aid the contras, or counterrevolutionaries, in their effort to overthrow the Sandinista regime. If there were any doubt, it was made even clearer this weekend by publication of a leaked Administration report laying out strategy in the region and referring to the United States' policy of supporting the efforts of the contras to overthrow the Sandinistas. In addition, the House Intelligence Committee, in its important report accompanying the Boland-Zablocki bill, has told the House that it can no longer assure it that the Administration is not seeking to overthrow the Government in Managua.

The Central Intelligence Agency's part in these efforts is simply illegal. More than a year ago the intelligence committees put such activities out of bounds and last December, without dissent, the Congress wrote a clear prohibition into the law. Yet C.I.A. money continues to flow in large quan-

ties to pay for military forces that proclaim as their goal the overthrow of the Sandinistas — and conduct military operations that can have no other purpose. If the House rejects the Boland-Zablocki bill, it will be sanctioning lawlessness and conceding that it can do nothing to force the President to obey the law.

The covert operation that the C.I.A. launched at the direction of the President is also a clear violation of international law and of numerous American treaty obligations that prohibit the interference of one country in the internal affairs of others. The symmetry principle would suggest that we should break the law as long as others do so. Does this mean that we should use chemical weapons, urge the Salvadoran military to disregard the rules of war and invade neighboring countries simply because other nations do? Clearly not. The way to promote respect for international law is to obey the rules ourselves, seek to punish those who violate the law and, at the least, try to counter the effects of their illegal acts.

The Boland-Zablocki bill proceeds along these lines. It takes the Administration at its word that the purpose of the covert operation is to interdict the flow of supplies from Nicaragua to the rebels in El Salvador and authorizes substantial assistance to the governments of the region for that purpose. This aid must be used in a manner that is consistent with international law and according to a plan presented publicly to Congress.

Ronald Reagan's secret war in Nicaragua is not only illegal; it is also extremely dangerous. Only by provoking a wider war — and drawing

## Stop the illegal war in Nicaragua

the United States into it — can the Administration hope to accomplish its purpose. No knowledgeable student of the region in or out of the Government believes that the Washington-armed invasion force can succeed in forcing the Sandinistas to end their support for the revolution in El Salvador or that the invasion force can overthrow the Government in Managua. Either the operation is another miscalculation in the tradition of the Bay of Pigs or its real purpose is to provoke the Nicaraguans to Honduras, thus bringing on a larger war in which United States military forces would be used to overthrow the Sandinistas.

Whatever its purpose, there is no doubt that the military operations by contras entering Nicaragua from Honduras have vastly increased the possibility of a war between these two nations. It is also clear that the United States' increasingly close ties to the Honduran military would make it difficult for us to stay out of that war. Congress and the public have the right to full public debate over any American action that could lead to war.

The first step in regaining that right, before it is too late, is for the House to pass the Boland-Zablocki bill. Congress should then insist that any United States plans for increased interdiction of the arms flow in Central America be debated openly and conducted overtly. Only a policy based on public debate, adherence to principle and respect for the law can command the wide support that is necessary to defend American interests while keeping us out of war.

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